

BROADCAST TRANSCRIPT

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LARRY MANTLE, host:

Well, to give us the perspective of local governments, Mark Pisano joins us. He's executive director of the Southern California Association of Governments, known as SCAG, and he's also a member of Governor Schwarzenegger's taskforce on environmentally streamlining development projects to get more affordable housing constructed in California.

Mark Pisano, good to have you with us again on AIRTALK.

Mr. MARK PISANO (Southern California Association of Governments): Larry, it's a pleasure being with you.

MANTLE: Well, you've heard the pros and cons, and undoubtedly you've been looking at this package of bills. What do your member constituents of the various cities of California think about the proposals?

Mr. PISANO: Larry, we haven't yet had an opportunity to take the package of bills to our- our committees and our board, but I- let me just share with you- over the last several years, we've undertaken what we call a growth vision for Southern California--how are we going to develop the housing that we need, particularly housing that's affordable; and how are we going to deal with the congestion we have that's becoming intolerable in parts of our region; and, furthermore, how are we going to continue to make progress on improving our air quality. And that effort involved about 5,000 individuals throughout the region in a dialogue as to how should we grow, develop, what changes should we make.

And the conclusion to that was that we need to change 2 percent of the urban area within Southern California. We didn't use the term "infill." Rather, it's both in the western part of our region, LA and Orange County, and also in the eastern portions of our region, Riverside, San Bernardino and north in Ventura and out to Imperial. And the 2 percent area is around urban areas, what I would call transit and transportation corridors. If you change the urban form around transportation corridors, we have substantial improvements within the region.

Having said that, we then raise the question, what can the state do to help our collective members move in that direction? The package of bills that the Democrats have just introduced is one such vehicle. The governor and its advisory committee on improving and streamlining the environmental process is looking at other dimensions.

I will say that our members feel that we need state legislative help to enable us to do the things that are going to be necessary to make this region work, so the bills on the table and the processes in Sacramento are going to be absolutely essential. Now, the devil's in the details, however.

MANTLE: What are your thoughts about some of the criticism-you just heard it from Senator Dick Ackerman- that this is attempting to go against what the majority of Californians are doing in voting with their dollars and their willingness to drive long commutes to go to and from work, that this is a very small percentage of the population who really desires to live in this kind of high-density inner-city environment?

Mr. PISANO: Well, the first observation I would share on that is that we're talking about changing development patterns throughout the region. So it's not just an inner-city LA or a core Orange County issue; it's a change in the urban landscape. And we purposely call it the 2 percent strategy—not infill and—and not high-density urban (sic) necessarily, but rather development patterns around transportation systems that give people more choices.

Now, in terms of what's happening, I mentioned 5,000 individuals actively participated. They included the building industry, the Urban Land Institute, the banks, as well as local officials and environmental and community groups. I will say that what's happened over the last ten years is that there is a change in the way we're now developing Southern California, that over 40 percent of our development in LA and Orange County was along these transportation corridors. And the builders and banks basically said there is a product for segments of the society that needs to be built that we're not building.

MANTLE: And what are the impediments to that?

Mr. PISANO: The impediments are that we have some difficulties in some of our general plans in the general plan framework that need to be changed. We have difficulties in some of our environmental processes that make it more difficult. It's easier to go out into the outlying area where you don't have a lot of community opposition or neighborhood opposition and get EIRs through. It's more difficult in the urban area or—in the more developed areas. Finally, there are real financial disincentives that we're going to have to sort out, and, most critically, there aren't the resources to develop the amenities to have the development in urban areas, because we don't have resources for the transportation and transit and other amenities.

Having those are the impediments, and we now need guidance and help— not guidance— we need help from the state to help us deal with these issues. Therefore what the— what comes out of the governor's set of proposals, what the Democrats are putting on the table I believe will give us the basis to have the dialogue and debate on "What changes do we need in order to make our region work, to make our cities and, more importantly, to make our communities work?"

MANTLE: Let's take a listener call. This comes from Mannie driving on the 91 Freeway. You're on AIRTALK.

MANNIE (Caller): Hi. How are you today?

MANTLE: Doing well, thanks.

MANNIE: Good. You know, I— I'm a Realtor, and I can tell you over the last ten years and living in Riverside, the studies are showing that Riverside will become the size of Chicago within the next 20 years. I really feel the federal government just needs to step-in, because in the last ten years, the state has done nothing to improve traffic quality, the local governments have done nothing to improve traffic quality. Instead, they cater to the builders and let them have everything they want, forcing us to pay Mello-Roos and special assessments. For what? For roads that don't work and traffic that goes nowhere.

MANTLE: All right. Well, Mark Pisano, these are the issues that are your bread and butter.

Mr. PISANO: (laughs) Well, I think the caller is sensing a high degree of frustration, and I think that what I hear him say— and you didn't ask, but— the way we currently are doing business is not helping us to solve our problem. And I believe that the vision that my members have put on the table and that we're collectively working on, I will say there was unanimous support on my board for it— that was 50 elected officials saying "Yes, let's go do something" and the dialogue that's now beginning in Sacramento— if we get some changes in the way we do business, we can go back to solving problems and building our community and relieving the congestion.

MANTLE: Well, there's a fundamental conflict, though, isn't there? Because when you've got a lack of affordable housing, and so the push is to try and build higher-density projects to bring housing prices down

and to accommodate more people, you often have congestion that results from that, and so then the quality of life decreases. So it seems that, in a sense, you've got cross-purposes that government is trying to figure out how to deal with.

Mr. PISANO: Well, yeah, you described the- the- the dilemma that we face in the already developed portion, and then the other strategy is you just go further and further out and buying housing that's more affordable, and you commute in and you make the commute trip more difficult.

The real answer is building balanced communities that have a better mixture of uses and more choices for transit alternatives and to have an environmental and financial framework that'll- that- that will allow individuals to have that kind of choice. I mean, the discussion that the two senators had--I think you can say that if you look at Southern California, they're both right in one sense.

And I don't mean that to be apologizing for either position, but the majority of the region doesn't- doesn't want to live in a different environment. They like the suburban environment. But on the other hand, there's large market niches that do want to live in a different kind of an environment, and so our challenge is, how- how do we provide for both? And that's why we came to this notion--you change 2 percent of the urban area, you transform the region. We need the tools to transform the 2 percent. If the 2 percent will work, then the other 98 percent will work, and I think that's the- the- in very simple terms, the insight of our growth vision.

The important part, Larry, that's begun now- and that is we need a change in the roles under which decisions are both made and financed, and those changes come from Sacramento.

MANTLE: All right. Mark Pisano, I'm sorry to cut you off there, but we're just about out of time. Thank you for joining us.

Mr. PISANO: Thank you.

MANTLE: We appreciate it--executive director of the Southern California Association of Governments, the nation's largest regional planning agency. And we'll hear what the member cities and counties think of this package of Democratic legislation that's been introduced into the State Senate to try and make it easier for higher-density villages, particularly around transit hubs, to be built in urban areas.

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